

The Secret of Contentment

Q. How would you depict contentment if you had to draw a picture to capture it?

Pu-Tai (literally cloth sack – Japanese *Hotei*) – an image of contentment as the fulfilment of every need and more. Pu-tai has plenty of everything he needs, as his belly shows! Is this what contentment is?

Why contentment matters

Contentment means being at peace with oneself and the world or “a steady restfulness of spirit”.

Pandemic discontentment

- **How much is enough?**
Western society increasingly discontented. Advertising works through making wants into needs.
- **The rat race of life**
Often people are too busy to stop and think about it! They get so caught up in various tasks (including career and even church service) that they forget why they are busy.
- **Challenge for Churches** – so many young people who commit little but expect much

The ancient Indian classic, the *Pantachantra*, captures why contentment is good.

“All good fortune belongs to a contented mind, as the world is leather-covered for him who walks in shoes”

Now more people are stopping to ask how they can have contentment and are seeking for a path to reach it.

Paths to contentment?

The fundamental problem in seeking contentment is what should you do with desire? There have been three main approaches throughout the history of philosophy:

a) Eliminate desire – Buddha, Lao Tze (Taoism), Stoics

Gautama Buddha (founder of Buddhism, 563-483 BC): “eliminate desire and you will come to peace”.

Lao Tze (founder of Taoism 600-531 BC): “Health is the greatest possession. Contentment is the greatest treasure. Confidence is the greatest friend. Non-being is the greatest joy.”

b) Limit desire – Confucius / Marx (balance with needs of others)

c) Satisfy desire – through reason (Plato) or pleasure (Epicurius, Hedonism)

Epicurius (341-271 BC): “contentment (is) a great good” to be achieved through pleasure

Q. How should Christians view desire, and how can we know true contentment?

Philippians 4:11&12

“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. I can do all things through him who gives me strength.”

- Paul had **learned** contentment – it is something we need to learn, it doesn't come naturally.
- Paul thanking Philippians for a gift (v10) – not so much because it met his need but because it glorified God and helped them to grow. This is an interesting attitude to what others contribute, especially in church fellowship. We should be thankful for the gifts and abilities of others.
- For “content” Paul uses the Stoics' favourite word which literally means “self-sufficient” BUT he does what the New Testament writers often did and redefines it by giving it a new Christian meaning.
- How did the Stoics use this word? It is chillingly defined by one writer named Epictetus:
“Begin with a cup or a household utensil, if it breaks say, ‘I don't care.’ Go on to a horse or a pet dog, if anything happens to it say, ‘I don't care.’ Go on to yourself and if you're hurt or injured in any way say, ‘I don't care.’ And if you go on long enough and if you try hard enough you'll come to a state when you can walk your nearest and dearest suffer and die and say, ‘I don't care.’”
- In response one writer says: “The Stoics made of the heart a desert and called it peace.”
- But, if you read in the New Testament about Paul you will find he was certainly NOT without desire – he was a passionate, intense person who cared deeply about others.
- For him contentment was not “self-sufficiency” but “Christ-sufficiency” (v13)
- He had learned how to be content in **every** situation. How did he learn it?

The school of contentment – three lessons:

1. What do we really need?

“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you’”

(Hebrews 13:5)

- We are commanded to be content with what we have! This may seem harsh at first glance.

- Take time to perform another mental exercise: ask the question what do you really need?
- The situation of the first readers was not easy. These words are not a bland pat on the back but the writer takes a promise of God first given to Joshua (Deut. 31) and now applies it to all Christians.
- This is a Christian view of desire: that every desire find its ultimate end in God. He is the one thing we desperately, and according to the writer of Hebrews He is the one thing we can have and be sure of never losing if our faith is in Christ. He satisfies the deepest longing in our souls.
- "You have created us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you" (*Augustine 354-430*). There is a "God-shaped hole" in every person that only He is big enough to fill.

2. What should we aim for?

"But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing we will be content with that"
(1 Timothy 6:6)

- How do you measure a successful life? It is not by what you do or achieve, but by the closeness of your walk with God and how much you are growing in godliness (Christ-likeness).
- The goal of life should be not contentment but godliness.
- Contentment is like pot of gold at the end of the rainbow – it eludes those who make it their goal.
- Contentment is a by-product of the pursuit of godliness. If obedience to Christ means that you are left with only food and clothes, would you be content with that?
- See Christ's teaching – Matthew 6:33

BUT what about the times when obedience to God takes us into the place where we don't even have those basic needs or we find ourselves in the place where life itself is threatened by illness or death? Lesson number 3 is the hardest one of all in this school.

3. What should we expect?

"But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." (II Corinthians 12:9)

- Philippians 4:13 – all things through Christ who strengthens Him. This is not so much miraculous provision but strength to face, endure and remain content in every situation.
- II Corinthians deals with some of the big challenges to contentment, but external things were no match for the internal struggle of Paul's "thorn in the flesh". In that deeply painful experience God's words came to Paul and assured him that even when Paul didn't know how to go forward God would not let go of him. The Lord's grace is sufficient, and His power will rest on us. This promise carries beyond the grave too – it is eternal and absolute.
- David's experience – Psalm 23 is a great description of a contented life that comes through faith.

Image of contentment - Joseph

Childlike faith and dependence is central to contentment. God is in control and He has not gone away!

The fruit of contentment

a) For the individual – contentment precludes anxiety, but not desire (*Matthew 6:25-34*)

- Some desires are very good things – we ought to have a longing for God's kingdom to come in its fullness and what is wrong in this world should grieve us.
- However, there is a paradox of desire and restlessness (we are strangers in this world) but at the same time contentment and joy (the Kingdom is here now in our lives).
- Desire in and of itself does not make us suffer. Desire names our restless hearts that long for Heaven when we will know Him even as we are known.
- Now, though, we can know the **Shalom rest** of God – this is vital to good health as anxiety will be relieved when we learn to be content to be who God has created us to be.
- This gives a new purpose to life – we can know what God has gifted and called us to do and can be content to know that the things we are not called to do are not our responsibility.

b) In community – contentment has two opposites: envy and greed

- We will become more concerned for the well-being of others and not just ourselves.
- This is meaningful for churches – community depends on contentment in identity and role.
- Imagine that community where everyone can be thankful for the gifts of others not so much because it met a need in them but because God was glorified and that person grew! May it be so with us.